

Minutes of the Meeting of the COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING COMMITTEE held at the Council Chamber, Epsom Town Hall on 10 October 2023

PRESENT -

Councillor Clive Woodbridge (Chair); Councillor Bernice Froud (Vice-Chair); Councillors Shanice Goldman, Alison Kelly, Rachel King and Chris Ames (as nominated substitute for Councillor Kate Chinn)

In Attendance: Councillor Bernie Muir

Absent: Councillor Kate Chinn, Councillor Lucie McIntyre and Councillor Darren Talbot

Officers present: Andrew Bircher (Interim Director of Corporate Services), Rod Brown (Head of Housing and Community), Annette Snell (Housing Operations Manager) (agenda items 1-6), Arjan de Jong (Strategic Housing Manager) (agenda items 1-6), Emma Hill (Principal Programme Manager), Richard Appiah-Ampofo (Senior Accountant), Lucy Buckland (Arts, Culture and Heritage Programme Officer), Debbie Firmo (Principal Housing Grants Officer) (agenda items 1-4) and Phoebe Batchelor (Democratic Services Officer)

5 QUESTION AND STATEMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions or statements were received from the Public.

6 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of any Disclosable Pecuniary Interests in respect of any item of business to be considered at the meeting were made by Members.

7 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Committee confirmed as a true record the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 22 June 2023 and authorised the Chair to sign them.

8 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING GRANTS ASSISTANCE POLICY

The Committee received a report proposing a revised version of the existing Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy which was originally agreed by the Community & Wellbeing Committee in June 2017.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **Assistance with Form Completion.** In response to a question from a Member, the Housing Grants Officer explained that, in the event an applicant is experiencing difficulty in completing their application form for any reason, the Council can provide a service in which an Officer can visit the applicant in order to assist with the completion of their form. Such assistance can also be provided over the phone.
- b) **Home Adaptation and Relocation.** In response to a question from a Member, the Housing Grants Officer explained that, in the event that a need for home adaptation work has been identified, but the accommodation isn't suitable for said works, there is a separate grant that the Council can offer to help the applicant to relocate. She explained that an applicant isn't automatically pushed up the register priority because they are in a property that can't be adapted, though any disabilities that the applicant may have are taken into account in line with the allocation policy. She explained that it has been a rare occurrence that a property has been unable to be adapted as required.
- c) **Policy Flexibility.** A Member enquired as to whether there was any flexibility to accommodate applications submitted outside of the conditions set out in the policy due to exceptional circumstances. The Housing Grants Officer explained that such applications would be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Strategic Housing Manager, as set out at section 8 of the policy.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Approve and adopt the revised Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy as set out in Appendix 1, in response to central government guidance to utilise grant funding more flexibly and to proactively assist more households.**

9 HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY REVIEW

The Committee received a report reviewing and updating the Council's Housing Allocations Policy and Choice Based Letting scheme that was adopted in June 2015.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **Domestic Abuse Act and Rehousing.** In response to a question from a Member, the Housing Operations Manager stated the housing needs register is a waiting list and normally cannot address those who have an urgent need for rehousing, explaining that often the more appropriate route for those at immediate risk of domestic abuse is to go through the housing options process. She explained that the policy, however, had been designed to be flexible to allow cases to be considered on a case-

by-case basis so as not to create barriers for people wishing to be on the housing needs register.

- b) **Care Leavers.** In response to a concern raised by a Member, the Housing Operations Manager confirmed that she was happy to add an additional sentence to the policy, under 'Care Leavers' on page 18 of the policy, to set out that cases in which a care leaver has passed the age of 21 can be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- c) **Single persons and couples property qualification.** A Member enquired as to why single people and couples were grouped together, as seen at a) under 'Financial Resources' on page 19 of the policy. The Housing Operations Manager explained that due to a low amount of studio properties within Epsom & Ewell, single persons and couples would both qualify for one-bedroom properties and hence had been grouped together accordingly.
- d) **Supporting Documentation Timeframe.** A Member enquired as to whether there would be any flexibility within the 14-day timeframe, as set out in the procedure for applying for social housing, on page 24 of the policy. The Housing Operations Manager explained that all applicants receive an email the day after applying informing them of what they need to provide, and the timescales involved. She stated that if an applicant requires additional time, they can request it and it will be noted on their application. She explained that closed applications are able to be reopened at no penalty to the applicant.
- e) **Error within Wording of Policy.** Following a question from a Member, it was noted that page 73 of the policy contained an error. It was confirmed by the Housing Operations Manager that the second paragraph down on the page should be amended to read '*...but do not have a local connection with Epsom and Ewell Borough Council*'.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Adopt the changes to the Housing Allocation Policy and Choice Based Letting Scheme.**

10 HOMELESSNESS: HALF YEAR UPDATE

The Committee received a report setting out the actions taken to minimise the uplift and identifying the available funding to cover the additional expenditure.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **Private Sector Leasing Scheme ('PSL') Properties.** In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager confirmed the Council are currently leasing 11 properties from private sector landlords under the PSL scheme. He explained that the Housing team intended to encourage further landlords to join the scheme once the current team staffing resource issue has been resolved.

- b) **Management of Properties.** In response to a question from a Member, the Housing Operations Manager explained that a benefit to the Council in managing properties itself, through the PSL scheme, is the flexibility it affords to the Council in allowing for upscaling as and when required. The Strategic Housing Manager added that some of the Council's temporary accommodation is provided by housing associations.
- c) **Micropod housing.** In response to a question from a Member, the Head of Housing and Community stated that there was to be further investigation into ascertaining suitable sites within the borough for the establishment of micropod housing.
- d) **Homelessness Prevention Grant Funding.** In response to a question from a Member, the Strategic Housing Manager explained that the Council received an allocation of Government funding through the Homelessness Prevention Grant in order to ease the financial pressures on Councils dealing with the unprecedented cost of living crisis and any potential impact of homes for Ukraine guests losing their accommodation.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Note the actions which have been taken to manage homelessness over the past 6-12 months.**
- (2) **Agree to utilise Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and homelessness grant reserves to cover the anticipated increase in expenditure to enable the Council to meet its duties under the Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.**
- (3) **Note that a further update will be provided at the Community & Wellbeing Committee in March 2024.**

11 ARTS, HERITAGE AND CULTURAL STRATEGY

The Committee received a report presenting the Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy for Epsom and Ewell, which sets out a vision and direction for the development of cultural services, facilities, and activities within the borough.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **Signposting and Promotion of Cultural Assets within the Borough.** Following a question from a Member regarding the signposting and promotion of cultural assets and activities within the borough, the Principal Programme Manager highlighted the recently launched Nonsuch Park Formal Gardens Virtual Guided Tour, developed as part of the ongoing work with the Bloomberg Connects app, headed by the Arts, Culture and Heritage Officer. The Principal Programme Manager explained there was an intention to create an Arts, Culture and Heritage page on the Council's website, to be used as an area to share progress on the projects referred to in the report and the strategy, and to potentially promote other relevant cultural institutions within the borough.

- b) **Community Groups.** A Member enquired as to why the list of community groups on Page 14 of the Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy, as seen at appendix 1 to the report, listed the LGBTQ+ and BAME communities together as a single entry on the list. The Principal Programme Manager stated that historically, both communities have been seldom heard from within the Epsom & Ewell Borough and have been listed together to indicate the equal priority to which they are to be afforded by the strategy. The Chair added that a goal of the strategy is for it to be tool to encourage and foster inclusivity and accessibility for all community groups.
- c) **Communication and Marketing.** A Member enquired as to how the cultural events within the borough would be communicated and marketed to residents. The Principal Programme Manager explained that there were ongoing conversations with the Council's internal communications team, along with investigations into the possibility of taking on marketing apprentices. She stated that, through the Council's relationship with the University of the Creative Arts, there was a plan to provide communications work experience for a number of the university's students. She informed the Committee that Beam Counters (or 'people counters') had been installed at Council venues, the data from which, in conjunction with survey data taken on site during cultural events, allows Officers to ascertain as to how many people, and which demographics, show interest in particular events, in order to enable more targeted marketing and communication.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Adopt the Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy.**
- (2) **Note that as part of implementing the strategy and action plan officers will:**
 - i) **establish a Cultural Stakeholder Group,**
 - ii) **plan, lead and deliver council-led projects and activities set out within the current and future action plans, and support and facilitate the activities of partners in delivering the strategy,**
 - iii) **identify new arts, heritage and cultural partners and stakeholders and work on feasibility studies for future projects and initiatives as resources allow,**
 - iv) **write and submit any grant funding requests that will support delivery of the Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy.**

12 PLAYING OUT SCHEME

The Committee received a report providing details of the Playing Out (Play Streets) scheme and seeking approval from the Committee to introduce this to the Borough.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **Clarification of Terminology.** A Member suggested that the term, 'residents', at paragraph 4.1.2 of the report, could be replaced with the term, 'organisers', to better clarify with whom the responsibilities lie. This feedback was noted by the Director of Corporate Services.
- b) **Liability.** The Director of Corporate Services explained that the scheme would not introduce any new liabilities for Epsom & Ewell Borough Council or for Surrey County Council that do not already exist.
- c) **Future Playing Out Scheme Update Report.** The Chair expressed that he wished for a Playing Out Scheme update report to be brought back to Committee after a period of a year in order for the Committee to be able to review the scheme.
- d) **Support for Volunteer Stewards.** Following a question from a Member, the Director of Corporate Services highlighted to Members the Playing Out Scheme website, which he explained provides support for to-be stewards, including health-and-safety information and training.
- e) **Emergency Services Notification.** Following a question from a Member, the Director of Corporate Services confirmed that as part of the application process, the Council will notify Surrey County Council and the Emergency Services of the forthcoming road closure.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) **Approve the introduction of the Playing Out scheme as detailed in the report.**

13 2024/25 BUDGET TARGETS

The Committee received a report informing them of the Council's revenue budget targets presented to the Strategy & Resources Committee in July 2023 and seeking guidance on the preparation of the Committee's service estimates for 2024/25.

The following matters were considered by the Committee:

- a) **6% Increase Target.** The Senior Accountant explained that the target to increase fees and charges income by 6%, as set out at 3.2.7 of the report, had been reached in consultation with the Heads of Services, who had

considered the potential adverse impact of the increase to the volume of the relevant service and venue usage.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved to:

- (1) Note the implications of the budget targets presented to Strategy & Resources Committee on 13 July 2023.**
- (2) Support the changes to services and savings previously identified in Table 1 of this report and that these are included within the budget presented to this Committee in January 2024.**
- (3) Consider how additional income or savings can be generated to address the projected Council wide funding gap of £1.1m in 2024/25, rising to £2.5m by 2027/28.**
- (4) Note that owing to the Council's projected budget deficit, any additional new revenue growth items (i.e., service enhancements resulting in increased net expenditure) supported by Policy Committees will need to be fully funded from existing budgets.**

The meeting began at 7.30 pm and ended at 8.52 pm

COUNCILLOR CLIVE WOODBRIDGE (CHAIR)